

The Kept

Harper Perennial

by James Scott

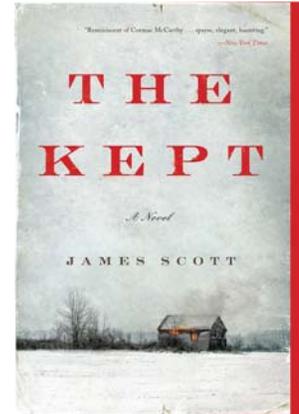
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Introduction

In the winter of 1897, midwife Elspeth Howell arrives at her isolated farmstead in upstate New York to discover an unthinkable crime. The only survivor is her twelve-year-old son, Caleb, who joins her in mourning the tragedy and planning its reprisal.

Their long journey leads them to a roughhewn lake town, defined by the violence of both its landscape and its inhabitants. There Caleb is forced into a brutal adulthood as he slowly discovers truths about his family he never suspected, and Elspeth must confront the terrible urges and unceasing temptations that have haunted her for years.

Throughout it all, the love between mother and son serves as the only shield against a merciless world.



Questions for Discussion

1. What is the significance of the title?
2. From the very first sentence, Elspeth Howell defines herself as a sinner. Do you share this view? Does your opinion change over the course of the book?
3. Caleb has never experienced the world outside the Howell farm before. What impact does this have on the story and on Caleb and Elspeth's relationship?
4. Compare Caleb to yourself at twelve years old. How would you have reacted in the face of such tragedy?
5. Jorah has a very strong relationship with the Bible. How does this manifest itself in his life and in how he deals with his family (especially Caleb)?
6. How do religion and spirituality affect the other characters?
7. How do gender roles function in *The Kept*?
8. Both Elspeth and Caleb make several attempts to give gifts to each other and to others. What do the gifts say about the giver in each instance?

9. Discuss the roles that parents and parental figures play in the lives of Caleb, Elspeth, Owen, and Charles.
10. How do Elspeth's upbringing and the death of Gusta van Tessel affect her later in life?
11. James Scott has said in interviews that he "wanted to explore the difference between being a mom and being a mother, and being a dad and being a father" in *The Kept*. What does this mean to you? Is Jorah a good dad? A good father? Is Elspeth a good mom? A good mother?
12. Elspeth and Jorah are on their own in the wilderness before they have their family. William and Margaret live by themselves in the middle of nowhere. Caleb lives in the barn. What are other examples of this "otherness," and how do they pervade the novel?
13. Discuss London White's place in the town of Watersbridge.
14. Ellabelle's snow angels among the dead bodies is one of many examples of the juxtaposition of innocence and violence in *The Kept*. What are some other examples? How does Ellabelle embody that contrast? How does she differ from Caleb and his brothers and sisters?
15. Why does Caleb keep the feather from home in the bottom of his bag? What significance does it have?
16. Joshua Ferris wrote in his novel *And Then We Came to the End*, "We had these sudden revelations that employment, the daily nine-to-five, was driving us far from our better selves." Is that true of the characters in *The Kept*? Does their work act as poison? As salve?
17. *The Kept* is set in 1897. How would the story change if it occurred twenty years later? Fifty? In the present day?
18. *The Kept*'s setting of upstate New York in the middle of winter is a character unto itself. How does this place weigh so heavily upon the story and characters?
19. The icehouse accident is illustrative of how different—and dangerous—life was at the time of the book than it is today. In the world of *The Kept*, how have people adopted different ways of coping with the close proximity to death?
20. The ending of the book allows the reader to imagine his or her own sequence of events. What do you think happens after the last page?